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INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 2000
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 000222

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [ASEC](#) [KDEM](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [PINS](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [BG](#)

SUBJECT: ARMY LAUNCHES SWEEP FOR MUTINEERS; CONSPIRACY
THEORISTS HAVE FIELD DAY

REF: A. DHAKA 213

[1](#)B. DHAKA 210

[1](#)C. DHAKA 207

[1](#)D. DHAKA 204

[1](#)E. DHAKA 218

Classified By: Ambassador James Moriarty, reasons 1.4 (b&d)

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) Dhaka remained calm March 2. The government ordered the army to begin a nation-wide sweep aimed at rounding up mutineers suspected of committing murder and arson during the border guard mutiny that left dozens of army officers massacred (reftels). In parliament, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina defended her government's performance and said she had requested investigative assistance from the US, UN and UK. Funeral services were held peacefully in Dhaka for 48 slain officers. Speculation as to the brains and motives behind the mutiny continues, with fingers pointing variously at opposition politicians, Pakistan and India. End Summary.

PARLIAMENT DEBATES MUTINY

[1](#)2. (SBU) During a heated and lengthy session of parliament March 1 members of the opposition criticized the government's handling of the situation, including its decision not to use military force to put down the mutiny and to grant amnesty to mutineers. The Prime Minister vigorously defended her government's performance, asserting that the decision not to use force avoided even greater bloodshed and that the amnesty did not include anyone who had committed murder, arson or looting. She vowed to hunt down and prosecute the guilty parties and told parliament she had requested investigation assistance from the UN, the US and the UK. (Note: Ref E reports on a formal GOB request for USG assistance received March 2. The UK High Commissioner received a similar request. According to a UN policy advisor, the GOB mentioned to the UN Resident Coordinator its desire for UN support, but has yet to specify the nature of that support. End note.) She also characterized the mutiny as "completely pre-planned," without providing further detail as to who may have been responsible for the planning.

[1](#)3. (C) During the same session, opposition leader Khaleda Zia called for cooperation with the government to resolve the crisis but complained that the government had failed to reach out to the opposition during the incident. Hussein Mohamed Ershad, leader of the Jatiya Party (allied with the Awami League), called for the government to disband the BDR for mutiny (Note: In addition to being a former Army Chief of

Staff, Ershad has been personally affected by the death of his nephew, one of the officers killed during the mutiny). The parliament also unanimously passed a resolution of condolence during the session.

ARMY LAUNCHES OPERATION REBEL HUNT

¶4. (C) Per Ref A, police charged 1,000 mostly unnamed BDR members with murder and arson March 1. On March 2, the government ordered the army to begin a nationwide search to apprehend fleeing mutineers. Local law enforcement officials confirmed that the operation, termed "Operation Rebel Hunt," was ongoing countrywide, with troops (in coordination with police) searching transportation centers among other locations. According to March 2 media reports, the operation had already apprehended 668 wanted individuals. (Note: The GOB decision to involve the army was a result of demands presented to the Prime Minister during her meeting with officers March 1).

¶5. (C) Media reports indicate that fleeing mutineers looted arms and munitions from BDR HQ. A senior Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) contact, currently participating in the hunt for mutineers, expressed his concern that some of these arms could end up in the hands of militants.

FUNERAL SERVICES

¶5. (U) President Zillur Rahman, Army Chief General Moeen,

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cabinet members and political leaders attended a funeral service with state honors in Dhaka March 2 for 48 officers and the wife of slain BDR chief Shakil Ahmed. The televised event transpired peacefully.

IT WAS A CONSPIRACY

¶6. (C) Both government and opposition MPs opined during remarks in parliament March 1 that the mutiny had all the elements of a conspiracy, and widespread speculation on that theme continues. Local media picked up reporting from Indian media claiming involvement by senior BNP MP, Salahuddin Qader Chowdhury, "a well known shipping magnate who is reportedly very close to the Pakistan military-intelligence complex." Meanwhile, representatives of Jamaat-e-Islami, Bangladesh's largest Islamic party, asserted to the Embassy that Indian intelligence had masterminded the conspiracy. After creating instability, India could then offer to help control the situation, in fulfilment of India's long-held desire to make Bangladesh a subservient client state. A senior RAB commander characterized the mutiny as "very well-planned and organized."

¶7. (SBU) Editorials in Dhaka's two leading English-language publications also fed into the conspiracy theory. There is "very little doubt that there is a deep-rooted plan to destabilize the country and exploit the situation," said the Daily Star, while the New Age asserted: "we cannot rule out the hand of outside quarters, both within and beyond the borders of the country, as instigators." The Daily Star also lamented the government's failure to involve the opposition in resolving the crisis and criticized the opposition's 'finger-pointing.'

COMMENT

¶8. (C) Operation Rebel Hunt is the most visible sign yet that the GOB is responding to criticism from army officers of its handling of the crisis. This operation is fraught with risk as emotional soldiers fight the temptation of taking the law into their own hands. Initial hopes that the political parties would put national interest above partisanship are

fading. The growing public consensus that there was a "hidden hand" behind the mutiny also risks fueling claims of a coverup if the investigation determines that there was no such mastermind. To date, post is not aware of any evidence that the mutiny was planned by any external mastermind.

MORIARTY